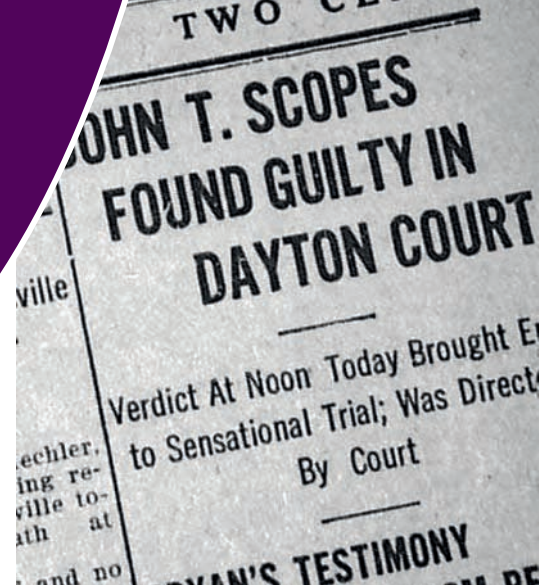


RANDY MOORE

**ABSTRACT**

Just before his death in 1970, John Scopes claimed that his famous trial “had no other effect upon my family” than his sister Lela losing her teaching job in Paducah, Kentucky. He was wrong. My interviews with John Scopes’s family members and descendants – most of whom have never talked about their famous relative until now – reveal that the legacy of the Scopes Trial continues.

Key Words: John Scopes; Scopes Trial; evolution; biology education.

○ Introduction

For decades, biology teachers and others from around the world have visited Dayton, Tennessee, to learn about the Scopes Trial and its associated issues and events. While in Dayton, these visitors photograph the famous courthouse, stand in the courtroom where John Scopes was convicted (Figure 1), and look for the myriad other places associated with the trial – for example, where Clarence Darrow questioned William Jennings Bryan, where Scopes lived, and where Bryan died (Moore, 2016).

Although Scopes’s famous trial produced no legal precedents, its events and legend have influenced virtually all of the many subsequent court cases involving the teaching of evolution and creationism in U.S. public schools. For example, in *Epperson v. Arkansas* (393 U.S. 97, 1968), the U.S. Supreme Court cited “the celebrated Scopes case” and, nearly two decades later in *Edwards v. Aguillard* (482 U.S. 578, 1987), referred to “the celebrated Scopes Trial of 1925” and “the legend of *Scopes v. State*.” More recently, in *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* (400 F. Supp. 2d 707, 2005), federal judge John E. Jones III cited “the Scopes ‘monkey trial’” in his decision.

“One thing is clear: John Scopes was wrong. His trial has affected – and continues to affect – many people.”

The Scopes Trial also had important consequences in Dayton. For example, the trial (and Bryan’s death five days after it concluded) helped spur the formation of Bryan College, which continues to thrive in Dayton. Several individuals associated with the trial were also affected, including Scopes and his family. For example, after enrolling in graduate school at the University of Chicago, John Scopes – in need of money – applied for a fellowship to pursue a PhD in geology. The university president, apparently equating Scopes’s advocacy of teaching evolution with atheism, dismissed Scopes’s application in a letter, saying, “Your name has been removed from consideration for the fellowship. As far as I am concerned, you can take your atheistic marbles and play elsewhere” (Scopes & Presley, 1967, p. 240). The cash-strapped Scopes dropped out of school and never received a graduate degree (Creviston, 2019).

Another relatively well-known result of the Scopes Trial was that Scopes’s youngest sister, Lela V Scopes (1896–1989), lost her teaching job in Paducah, Kentucky, because of “her belief in evolution” (Scopes & Presley, 1967, p. 243; Editorial, 1989; Figure 2). Lela was soon rehired in New York, where she continued her successful teaching career. Despite her treatment, Lela

never complained about what happened to her in Paducah. After moving back to Kentucky later in her life, Lela simply lamented that it was “too bad there was a conflict” between science and religion (Shelton & Smith, 1979).

The Scopes Trial has been linked with several social ideals (e.g., religious alternatives, nativism, feminism; see Moran, 2002, pp. 171–212), but – according to virtually all accounts – the personal impact of the Scopes Trial on Scopes’s family ended with Lela’s firing. Indeed, later in his life, even John Scopes claimed that “as far as I know,

the trial had no other effect upon my family than [Lela’s] decision at Paducah” (Scopes & Presley, 1967, p. 234). Given the notoriety of Scopes’s trial, I questioned this, but found no conflicting information



Figure 1. On Tuesday, July 21, 1925, John Scopes stood to hear the verdict at his famous trial in Dayton, Tennessee (photo courtesy of Bryan College).

in written accounts of the trial's impact on John Scopes's life after Dayton. There were mentions of what happened to Lela, but other members of John Scopes's family were never quoted or cited, and I wondered what they might say (if anything) about the impact of their famous relative's famous trial if given the opportunity to speak for themselves.

○ An Overlooked Source of Information

During the past eight years, I've visited multiple times with a variety of descendants, friends, and colleagues of John Scopes and his wife, Mildred Scopes (Moore, 2019). For most of Scopes's relatives, my questions were the first they had ever been asked about John Scopes by a researcher, and I was only the second researcher to contact John Scopes Jr. about his father's trial.

During my interviews, I heard countless stories, studied family scrapbooks, and learned much new information about John Scopes. (One of the meetings with John Scopes Jr. also coincided with a family reunion.) For the topics presented here, the stories were consistent and informative.

One thing is clear: John Scopes was wrong. His trial *has* affected – and continues to affect – many people. For example, when John Jr. (b. 1932) and his younger brother, William “Bill” Scopes (1936–2016), tried to join the military, their inductions were delayed (e.g., by more than seven months for John Jr.) by their father's association with Clarence Darrow and the ACLU.

Similarly, several of John Scopes's great-grandnieces today are proud of what John did in Dayton and quickly pointed out that their families “backed Uncle J.T.” However, they often quickly added comments such as “His trial was never discussed much” and “It was not a good thing for our family.” Great-grandniece Nancy Rose told me, “I think our disconnect with the church might have been the result of things that happened” in Dayton. Similarly, great-grandniece Lisa Rennegarbe – who first realized that her uncle

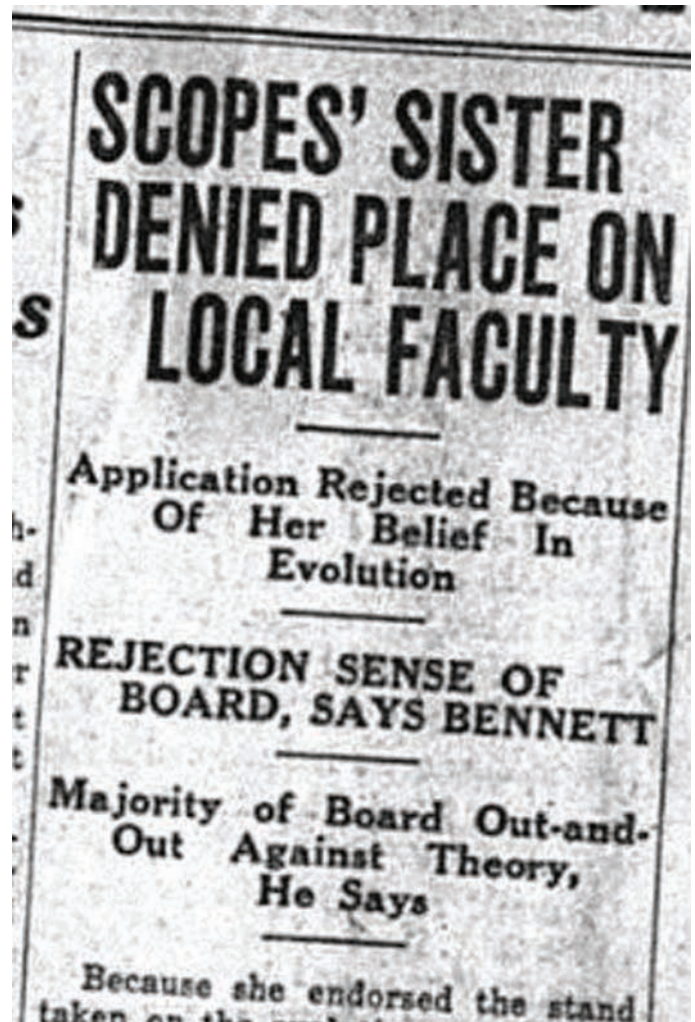


Figure 2. John Scopes's sister, Lela, was fired from her teaching job in Paducah, Kentucky, because she would not denounce her brother's views about teaching evolution.

was “a big deal” when she saw a report of his death on the evening news – admitted that the trial “was not a positive thing for our family” and that family members “just get tired of defending what Uncle J.T. did.”

○ What's in a Name?

Even the name “Scopes” in John's descendants has generated controversy. For example, Walter Scopes Gilliam (1916–1982), a son of Nannie Mae Scopes Gilliam (1888–1988; John Scopes's oldest sister), became a deacon in Olivet Baptist Church in Paducah, despite the fact that – according to his wife – “the name ‘Scopes’ caused problems in the church.” The negative view of the Scopes name by some in the congregation was most evident in a hallway of the church, where pictures of all of the deacons were displayed above their full names. The only exception was Gilliam, whose name was listed simply as “Walter Gilliam” (i.e., without his middle name, Scopes, or even an “S.” abbreviation). The family, and others, noticed – and knew the reason for – the church's exceptional treatment of his middle name.

Susan Brooks, John Scopes's great-grandniece and Walter Scopes Gilliam's granddaughter, attended Heath Middle School in Paducah in 1982. On the first day of school, Susan's seventh-grade teacher pulled Susan aside and told her that she was "not going to put up with any [Scopes] trouble." When Susan told her mother about the incident, her mother admitted that "your grandfather had trouble with his name his whole life."

Similarly, in the early 2000s, a great-grandniece of John Scopes (who wishes to remain anonymous) and her husband were expecting a child. They planned to continue a family tradition by using the name of one of their ancestors as their child's middle name. When a Chattanooga church learned that they were considering using "Scopes" as the child's middle name, a group of concerned church members formed a "prayer group" to pray about the issue. For several weeks, a barrage of e-mails and phone calls tried to convince the couple that including "Scopes" in their child's name would "burden" the child for its entire life and might, in fact, be ungodly. They ultimately decided not to include "Scopes" in their child's name.

Historian Adam Shapiro (2013, p. 4) noted that the Scopes Trial and the historically inaccurate (but popular) movie *Inherit the Wind* "cemented the name Scopes becoming a label of derision employed by those who saw evolution as an irreligious and immoral doctrine." Great-grandniece Susan Brooks, after noting "the generally negative association of the Scopes name throughout

the Bible Belt," added a personal affirmation of Shapiro's conclusion when she explained that her family

simply had to adjust to the disapproval and suspicion by some in the community. Even today when the trial is discussed, it is not uncommon for family members to attempt an explanation of the distance between faith and science, or for some to begin a discussion with phrases like, "The Scopes are not atheists," as a way to remove the perceived ideological distance between us and them.

Ironically, Lela Scopes and her sister, Ethel Scopes Clark (1889–1962), later became Bill and John Jr.'s de facto parents when John and Mildred were battling alcoholism and (according to John Jr.) "pawned us off on my father's sisters" for several years. (For two of the years when the boys were living away from their parents, the boys attended the Paducah school from which Lela had been fired.) As John Jr. told me recently, "I don't know where we'd be without Lela. She saved us."

Bill and John Jr. lived with Lela and Ethel for three years, during which time Lela paid all of the boys' expenses. Later, Lela paid the college fees for both boys, as well as paying for the Paducah funeral services and tombstone for John and Mildred Scopes. Lela – whom John Jr. reveres as "the greatest person I've ever met" – also added the epitaph on her famous brother's tombstone: "A Man of Courage" (Figure 3).

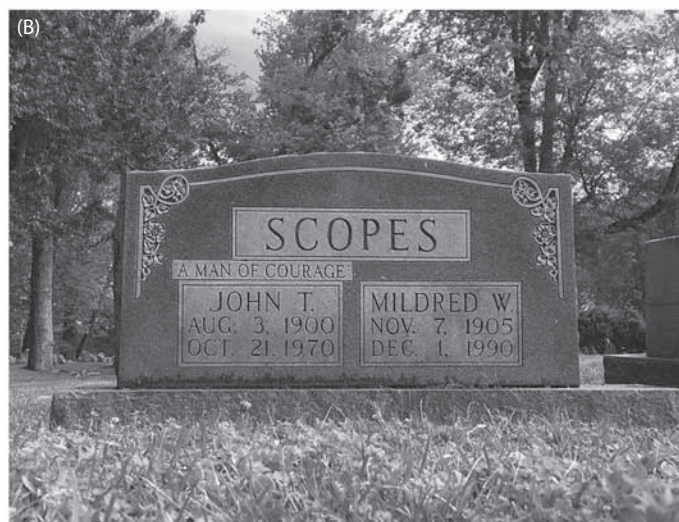
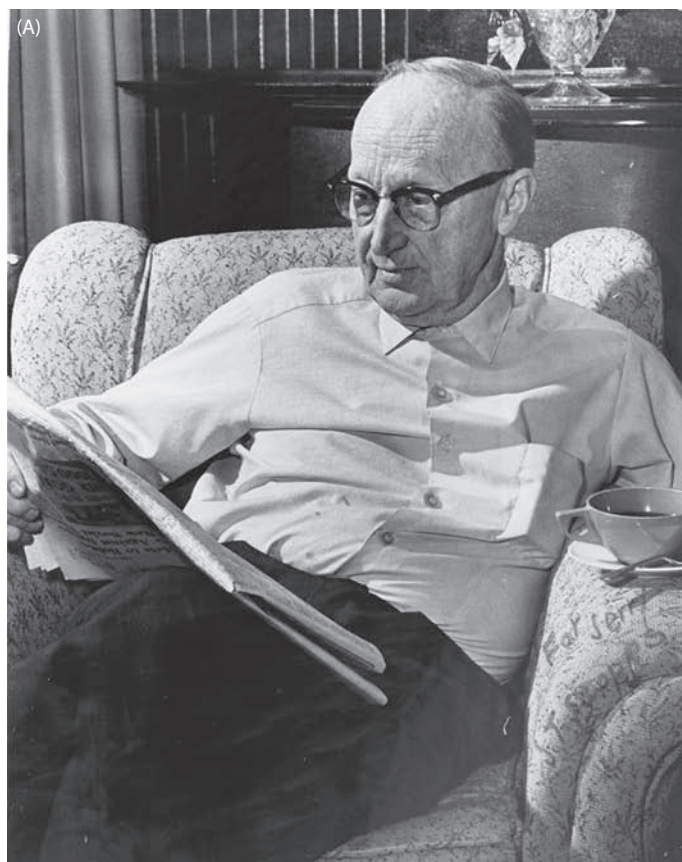


Figure 3. (A) John Scopes in his home in Shreveport, Louisiana, around 1965 (photo courtesy of Jerry Tompkins). (B) John Scopes died in 1970 and is buried in Paducah, Kentucky, beneath the inscription "A Man of Courage." Today, his legendary trial continues to affect his descendants (photo by Randy Moore).

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- Moore, R. (2019). Personal communications. These descendants, and the dates of my most recent meetings with them, include John Scopes Jr., a son of John Scopes, and his wife Jan, in Lafayette, Louisiana, May 12–15, 2019; William "Bill" Scopes, a son of John Scopes, and his wife Jackie, in Guntersville, Alabama, March 12–14, 2016; Jackie Scopes, John Scopes's daughter-in-law, in Guntersville, Alabama, November 19, 2016; Nancy Rose, John Scopes's great-grandniece, in Dayton, Tennessee, July 19–20, 2016; Susan Brooks, John Scopes's great-grandniece, and her husband, Chris, in Dayton, Tennessee, July 18–20, 2019; Richard Heflin, John Scopes's great-grandnephew, in Paducah, Kentucky, April 21–24, 2017; Lisa Rennegarbe, John Scopes's great-grandniece, in Bowling Green, Kentucky, June 2–5, 2019; Jeanette Gilliam Travis, John Scopes's grandniece, in Paducah, Kentucky, April 21–24, 2017. I also met several times with acquaintances of John Scopes, including Jim Presley (John Scopes's biographer) in Texarkana, Texas, on February 6, 2016; Jerry Tompkins (John Scopes's editor) in

Dayton, Tennessee, on July 19–20, 2016; and Susan Epperson (whose court case, *Epperson v. Arkansas*, overturned the law used to convict John Scopes in Dayton) and her husband, Jon, in Larkspur, Colorado, on November 1–2, 2018. Before and after these meetings, I also corresponded with most of these people via e-mail, telephone, and/or texts. I thank all of these friends for sharing their time, stories, and mementos with me.

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